



Ben Christian (center with fiddle) formed the popular Texas Cowboys in 1940. This publicity shot was taken in the 1940s at a local radio recording studio.

## They Brightened the Corner: The Era of Gulf Coast Texas Swing

Garna L. Christian

The veteran musician tilted his wide hat higher on his forehead and peered through the semi-darkness at the scattering of dancers on the nearly empty floor. With a rueful smile and a sweeping gesture toward his western swing band, he said, "You may be witnessing an endangered species." After a moment's reflection he added, "We have played in a lot of nice places, but this isn't one of them."<sup>1</sup>

The wry comments bespoke the grim reality of musical groups attempting to keep alive the 1930s Milton Brown/Bob Wills tradition in the 1980s against the obstacles of Top Forty radio stations, the relentless tide of discotheques, and the post-*Urban Cowboy* phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

His thoughts may have wafted back to the decades of the 1930s and 1940s when string bands such as the Bar-X Cowboys, Texas Cowboys, Texas Wanderers, Jubileers, and Blue Ridge Playboys filled dance halls in the Houston-Beaumont area, and names such as Cliff Bruner, Floyd Tillman, Leon Selph, Shelly Lee Alley, Moon Mullican, Ted Daffan, Ben and Elmer Christian, Jerry Irby, Jerry Jericho, and Dickie and Laura Lee McBride were as well known as the stars of the Grand Old Opry to East Texas hillbilly music fans. The ubiquitous local radio programs, rather than Nashville's WSM radio station, sustained these swing groups, enabling them to publicize their itineraries and showcase their talents for the enjoyment of a generation beset

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<sup>1</sup>Private conversation with author, September 27, 1985, Nacogdoches, Texas.

<sup>2</sup>These are common themes in discussions of Houston entertainers' problems. Minutes, Houston Chapter, Texas Music Association, 1985.

by depression and war.<sup>3</sup>

Their music, tributes to new and broken love, heartbreak and joy, sprang from both centuries-old tradition and the latest phonograph recordings. Immigrant English, Irish, and Scots carried folk songs among their cultural baggage to eighteenth-century America. Their music was adapted and developed in the isolated hills and valleys of Appalachia. The westward movement of the nineteenth century enhanced it with a wider variety of European and regional influences. Its evolution into western swing came with the accelerated rural migration of the 1920s and 1930s to the cities, where it borrowed from popular jazz and swing. The resultant product featured a danceable, rhythmic beat which supported improvisational phrasing by string and occasional brass lead instruments.<sup>4</sup>

#### *The Sound Comes to Houston*

This effervescent style reached its apex in the early depression years at Fort Worth, Texas. Fiddler Bob Wills, of Limestone County, and vocalist Milton Brown, a native of Stephenville, performed with guitarist Herman Arnspiger as the Aladdin Laddies in 1931. These three became the nucleus of the Light Crust Doughboys that same year. After Wills's move to Tulsa in 1934, where he fine-tuned the western swing genre, and Brown's sudden death two years later, some of their musicians came to Houston. There they enriched a musical environment already molded by the Fort Worth sound via the Texas Quality Network and phonograph recordings.<sup>5</sup>

The Texas Gulf Coast was a fertile field for the developing music. Ben Christian, a widely-traveled businessman from Rockdale, organized the Bar-X Cowboys in 1933 as Houston's first modern professional country band. A fiddler and a business manager, Christian was not part of the Fort Worth music picture, but he duplicated much of that style on local radio stations and in area dance halls. The repeal of Prohibition enlivened the entertainment business, which was already somewhat healthier in Houston than in many other cities since Houston had suffered slightly less in the Depression. Leon

<sup>3</sup>Garna L. Christian, *Stay A Little Longer: The First Generation of Houston Country Music* (Houston, 1985), 3-4; Christian, "It Beats Picking Cotton: The Origins of Houston Country Music," *Red River Valley Historical Review* 7(Summer 1982):37-38; Clyde Brewer, interview by author, December 8, 1983.

<sup>4</sup>Bill C. Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.: A Fifty-Year History* (Austin, 1968), 3-5, 177-181; Malone, "Country Music in the Depression Southwest," in *The Depression in the Southwest*, ed. Donald W. Whisenhunt, (Port Washington, 1980), 58-74; *Western Swing Historic Recordings, Vol. 2*, Old Timey LP 116, Arhoolie Records (Berkeley, 1975).

<sup>5</sup>Charles R. Townsend, *San Antonio Rose: The Life and Music of Bob Wills* (Urbana, Illinois, 1976), 11-83; Malone, *Country Music*, 173-176; Nick Tosches, *Country, The Biggest Music in America* (New York, 1977), 187-188.

Selph and Cliff Bruner, young fiddlers who had built reputations previously with Wills and Brown, respectively, soon followed Christian to the Bayou City. Selph's Blue Ridge Playboys and Bruner's Texas Wanderers competed with the Bar-X Cowboys for recognition as the area's most popular country band in the 1930s, with Bruner teaming with Moon Mullican at Beaumont before the end of the decade.<sup>6</sup>

Musical talent proliferated in Houston from that time on. Prominent songwriters Ted Daffan and Jerry Irby launched their careers with the Bar-X Cowboys, while legendary author-singer Floyd Tillman performed early with Selph. In 1940, Ben Christian left the management of the Bar-X Cowboys to his brother, Elwood, in order to form the Texas Cowboys, which featured vocalist Jerry Jericho. Although World War II thinned the ranks of the Gulf Coast bands, the postwar era witnessed a resurgence of activity and introduced Hank Locklin, Leon Payne, Curly Fox, and Texas Ruby to the region. However, a combination of economic and cultural factors would still the country boom locally as well as nationally by the mid-1950s.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Picking Cotton, Picking Tunes*

Most of the Houston-area musicians of the depression and war eras were native Texans, born in the early 1900s. They had rural backgrounds and often were members of large and impoverished families. Floyd Tillman, an exception since he hailed from Oklahoma, came across the Red River as an infant:

We moved to Post, Texas, about 1915, when I was about one year old. We came in two wagons. . . . There were eleven in the family and I was the youngest. . . . We were sharecroppers and there was a cotton mill in Post.<sup>8</sup>

Ray "Shang" Kennedy shared his hometown, Tioga, Texas, with singing cowboy Gene Autry, who liked to visit the local school to discuss his films with the students. But at home Kennedy shared space with a throng of siblings, including another future professional musician, Jack. "My parents had ten kids," recalled Ray, "and I was the youngest. That made it rougher on me."<sup>9</sup> Paul Brown, who eventually managed the Bar-X Cowboys, remembered moving from a farm into Davila, Texas:

I remember getting out [of the wagon] and looking around and seeing the

<sup>6</sup>Ben Christian, Jr., interview by author, December 12, 1981; Leon Selph, interview by author September 28, 1977; Cliff Bruner, interview by author, April 8, 1978; Tosches, 68.

<sup>7</sup>Ted Daffan, interview by author, October 24, 1977; Jerry Irby, interview by author, November 20, 1977; Floyd Tillman, interview by author, March 17, 1985; Paul Brown, interview by author December 27, 1984.

<sup>8</sup>Tillman interview.

<sup>9</sup>Ray Kennedy, interview by author, October 26, 1985.

old cotton gin and the stores and I thought, "Boy, what a place!" . . . Farming, I guess, got kind of heavy. [We were] sharecroppers, you know.<sup>10</sup>

Leon "Pappy" Selph, who worked with "Papa" Sam Cunningham and Wills at Fort Worth before returning to his native Houston and organizing the Blue Ridge Playboys in the early 1930s, differed from most of his colleagues with his urban origin. Still, his First Ward neighborhood had presented few luxuries. As a child he labored in a lumberyard with his father, a task Selph considered ordinary: "All the boys of my acquaintance worked at that time." Although a streetcar passed near his home, he routinely walked the mile and a half to downtown in order to avoid the seven-cent expense. The same frugality required Selph to get free haircuts at the barber college at a savings of ten cents a turn.<sup>11</sup>

Most musicians acquired a taste for their future careers at a tender age, often influenced by family members or friends who entertained at home parties or performed for their own amusement. To hear an available instrument usually provided sufficient impetus to wish to master it. Charles "Doc" Lewis turned to the parlor piano and charted a career that later included engagements with Bob Wills, George Jones, Leon Payne, and Charlie Walker. Ira Doyle and his three brothers "all grabbed something" in their youthful quest, with Ira securing the bass fiddle and a continuing profession. Clyde Brewer first adopted the mandolin when his small fingers failed to encircle a guitar neck. Dickie Jones picked up the violin after seeing Cliff Bruner perform, and eventually carried it to the stage of the Houston Symphony Orchestra. "Bud and Bud" Hooper wheedled a guitar from their father following an inspiring demonstration from an itinerant farmhand.<sup>12</sup>

While many retained vivid recollections of their discovery of the world of music, few could match Selph's early introduction:

My mother used to sit me in the middle of the bed, when I was a . . . small child, with a violin. . . . I couldn't play but I wanted to have that violin to pick on. . . . I liked that violin.<sup>13</sup>

Fellow fiddler Earl Caruthers told a similar story about his father, who performed into his eighties.

He rolled off the bed one day and the first thing his hands hit was his dad's fiddle. . . . He held onto it and the family couldn't get it out of his hand. . . . Finally, one said, "There's no use in taking the fiddle out of his hand.

<sup>10</sup>Brown interview.

<sup>11</sup>Selph interview.

<sup>12</sup>Charles Lewis, interview by author, July 28, 1984; Ira Doyle, interview by author, May 24, 1985; Brewer interview; Dickie Jones, interview by author, November 30, 1984; "Bud and Bud" Hooper, interview by author, May 3, 1985.

<sup>13</sup>Selph interview.

Why doesn't someone give him the bow?"<sup>14</sup>

The novelty and distinctive tone of the steel guitar aroused a deep sense of awe in its adherents. "The hair on the back of my neck stood up," recalled Ernest "Deacon" Evans of the first time he heard the instrument. After viewing a traveling Hawaiian guitarist or hearing the sound on a recording or broadcast, the typical aspirant, like Ralph "Dusty" Stewart, raised the strings on a standard guitar and attacked it as though it were a dobro, an instrument with metal vibrating discs that provided non-electric amplification.

Ted Daffan, who attained wide recognition as the composer of "Born To Lose," "Worried Mind," and a host of other hits, pursued perhaps the most methodical course:

I was fascinated with it, so I went down and bought a five-dollar guitar and a fifty-cent instruction book. Then I added a book of music from the Houston Public Library. I taught myself to read, write, and arrange. A year later I went to work teaching at one of the music schools.<sup>15</sup>

Most musicians, however, played by ear. They realized the disadvantage in being unable to reproduce unheard sounds while sensing a creativity they believed absent in more formally trained performers. On the other hand, Leon Selph, who attended music school, delighted W. Lee O'Daniel with his knowledge and joined the Light Crust Doughboys as musical arranger. Saxophonist George Ogg, of Berkville, projected his melodies from a firm base of instruction, but admired the spontaneity of the untrained musician. Dickie Jones, at home with either swing or classic, concurred with Ogg's assessment.<sup>16</sup>

The passion for expression generally carried beyond a single instrument, except for the singing guitarist, whose vocal talents almost always exceeded his musical abilities. The more adept musicians on occasion fondly chided the "three-chord Johnnies." One said of a former colleague, "I used to tell him to just hold the guitar and not try to play it."<sup>17</sup> Accompanists demonstrated a remarkable proficiency for a variety of instruments. Had Clyde Brewer mislaid his fiddle, he could have led off with any piece in the band. Earl Caruthers, with no trace of boastfulness, believed he could play "just about anything," given time to prepare.<sup>18</sup> For many musicians, such preparations took the form of "woodshedding," in which a musician shut himself up with an unfamiliar instrument until he had mastered it. However, the exigencies of

<sup>14</sup>Earl Caruthers, interview by author, January 11, 1985.

<sup>15</sup>Ernest Evans, interview by author, July 26, 1985; Ralph Stewart, interview by author, December 13, 1984; Daffan interview; Malone, *Country Music*, 169.

<sup>16</sup>Selph interview; George Ogg, interview by author, March 16, 1985; Jones interview.

<sup>17</sup>Brown interview; Jones interview.

<sup>18</sup>Caruthers interview.

the business sometimes precluded even that brief interval of experimentation. Ben Christian once asked Leon Jenkins, his regular piano and bass player, whether he would try his hand at the steel guitar that very evening. When Jenkins protested his unfamiliarity with the instrument, Christian teased, "It has strings on it, doesn't it?" Jenkins arrived a little early for the engagement and prepared himself well enough to win the accolades of the manager and audience at the designated hour.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Early Influences*

The musicians matched their breadth of musical skills with a depth of music appreciation. Few commercial hillbilly songs emerged from the early Depression, prompting the bands to play a wide variety of musical types. This eclecticism helped to fashion western swing, still the favored style of the veterans and one they likened closely to jazz. Despite their varied interests, these musicians shared some common influences in their early years. Virtually every performer credited the versatile Jimmie Rodgers, "The Singing Brakeman" of the 1920s and early 30s, as a childhood hero. While Rodgers settled in Texas shortly before his untimely death due to tuberculosis, the Mississippian's music sprang from the Southeast and his life experiences along the railroads. He performed in non-western attire, often sporting the flat straw hat popular at the time, and recorded with brass. Jerry Jericho recalled his older brother faithfully bringing the latest Rodgers record to their family home outside Millican.<sup>20</sup>

Laura Lee McBride, destined to become Bob Wills's first woman vocalist, attested that Rodgers also influenced women singers, the more so due to the paucity of female role models. As a girl, Laura Lee practiced the famous Rodgers yodel with a bucket over her head in the basement of her family's Oklahoma homestead so as not to disturb the neighbors. She was not so considerate, however, when she opted to sing in church Rodgers's latest release, "My Father Was a Drunkard." The unintended victim of the congregation's scrutiny was noted singer and composer "Tex" Owens, author of "Cattle Call."<sup>21</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Jimmie Rodgers's music, which drew from black styling and themes, appealed to the black Texas community. Victoria-born Bernard Williams, one of the few black country singers to perform in Houston during the period, sang the brakeman's tunes while herding cattle on a South Texas

<sup>19</sup>Leon Jenkins, interview by author, August 3, 1985.

<sup>20</sup>Freddie Real, interview by author, September 7, 1985; Tillman interview; Brown interview; Truman Welch, interview by author, December 1, 1985; Jerry Jericho, interview by author, July 18, 1980.

<sup>21</sup>Laura Lee McBride, interview by author, January 11, 1984.

ranch and entertaining in neighboring towns. Both bands and audiences were racially integrated in the prewar era, a condition that changed rapidly during World War II and its aftermath. Still, Williams found general racial tolerance in the Bayou City when he teamed with drummer Red Novak in the early 1950s.<sup>22</sup>

A religious background, common to many rural Texans in the early twentieth century, shaped the musicians' lives in varying degrees. The first music many remembered emanated from inspirational songs in home and church. The nature of the entertainment business made some think twice about a career spent amid drinking and dancing. Ira Doyle's older brothers—Buddy, Gene, and Ted—left the profession after a successful beginning because of religious convictions, and Ira retired for a time. Jerry Irby, whose composition "Driving Nails In My Coffin" exemplified the temptations inherent in the trade, turned exclusively to country gospel for several years before his death. Most, however, considered their talent a gift from God which should be utilized. A number of them recorded religious albums while retaining their professional credentials.<sup>23</sup>

#### *New Careers In Hard Times*

The Great Depression formed the backdrop against which these first-generation professionals launched their country music careers. While the Wall Street crash plunged the national economy into turmoil in 1929, the accustomed poverty of the young musicians insulated them from shock. "The way we were," Paul Brown chuckled, "it was a depression all the time. You couldn't tell the difference."<sup>24</sup> Long hours of toil since childhood, combined with an absence of luxuries, conditioned aspiring musicians for the rigors of travel, the unpredictable conduct of audiences and dance hall operators, the long hours, and the occasional lockouts by coldhearted landlords.

Despite the drawbacks, these early entertainers found the musician's life rewarding, and generally more lucrative than most of the other jobs for which they were qualified. "I never did like to pick cotton or raise watermelons," confessed Cliff Bruner. "I found out that I could make more money playing my fiddle."<sup>25</sup> Paul Brown chose his career after encountering a medicine show performer who earned fifteen dollars per week: "I thought that ought to be the life. That beat picking cotton."<sup>26</sup> Mickey Lane, a fiddler who grew up with the Pearland orchards, agreed that music provided a standard of living at least

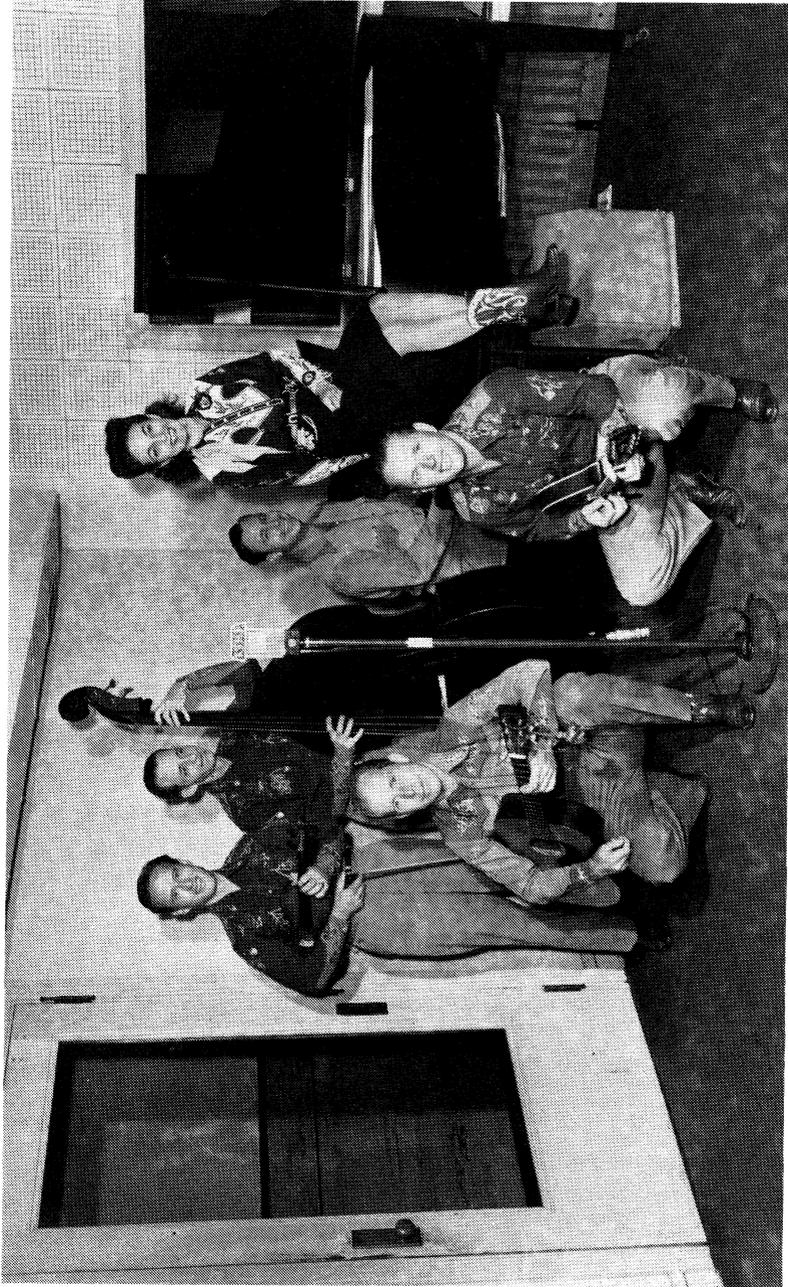
<sup>22</sup>Bernard Williams, interview by author, October 10, 1985.

<sup>23</sup>Doyle interview; Irby interview; Jericho interview.

<sup>24</sup>Brown interview.

<sup>25</sup>Bruner interview.

<sup>26</sup>Brown interview.



Floyd Tillman (front row at left) with "the boys" and his wife "Little Marge" in 1946. Tillman's band, which never had a name, was extremely popular with postwar country music fans.

equal to the highest-paid available skilled labor.<sup>27</sup>

To most musicians the combination of expression and profit proved unbeatable, even when the profit was small. Many attempted a music career from the outset. Getting started could be difficult. Leon Selph formed a fiddle and guitar duo and performed on street corners or in restaurants for meals. Jerry Irby

came in [to Houston] with just an old cheap-gut guitar and a few songs. . . . I managed to get me a new guitar and a few chords and get started on KTRH. Then I started playing for root beer stands, moved on up to beer parlors, and got together with fiddle players and other musicians, and we would play just anywhere we could get a place to play.<sup>28</sup>

A fortunate few entered the area at the invitation of an established band. After the intercession of a friend, "Deacon" Evans traveled from Oklahoma to Beaumont to join the prestigious Texas Wanderers, whom he had never heard.<sup>29</sup>

The musicians were divided over the idea of devoting a lifetime to a single career. While some deemed day work demeaning or unprofessional, others built up needed pensions at oil and construction companies, insurance agencies, and city and county positions while continuing to play music. In addition, not all had originally harbored visions of show business success. Freddie Real tended shops in Baytown before assembling an enduring string band. Jerry Jericho initially sold playground equipment in Houston. Such jobs, or the offer of free room and board with relatives in the area, often conditioned the musicians' choice of location. Many others came from the countryside, seeking a future as musicians in the urban centers of the Gulf Coast.<sup>30</sup>

#### *Banding Together*

From these modest origins sprang the name bands and personalities of the 1930s. The region withstood the Depression well enough to provide much of the dancing public a night on the town. The outlying Bohemian farm communities responded particularly well. Performers who worked both Beaumont-Port Arthur and Houston disagreed as to which spot better supported the swing bands. Some gave the nod to Houston for its larger population and more numerous clubs, while others considered the Bayou City "too much of a Baptist town."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Mickey Lane, interview by author, May 11, 1985.

<sup>28</sup>Selph interview; Irby interview.

<sup>29</sup>Evans interview.

<sup>30</sup>Real interview; Jericho interview; Tillman interview.

<sup>31</sup>Daffan interview; Ogg interview; Jones interview (quote).

Houston provided a variety of clubs to fill the musicians' five-to-six-nights-a-week schedules. Some of the dance halls of that time, especially along McCarty Drive in east Houston, were rowdy establishments with such unofficial names as "Bucket of Blood." But these nefarious clubs did allow new groups to enter the business. Halls of the caliber of the Silver Bell and Winter Garden in the Golden Triangle, the Old Style Inn and Wanderers' Tavern in Pearland, and Cook's, Eagle's Hall, and Polish Hall in Houston, represented the plums around which leading organizations fashioned their bookings. Like the radio stations, most club owners paid no salaries, preferring to split the gate on an 80-20 division in favor of the band.<sup>32</sup>

A fraternal spirit permeated the music community. Occasional personal animosities notwithstanding, musicians shared such common backgrounds and moved so easily from one band to another that few antagonisms or rivalries long survived. In the words of Laura Lee McBride, "We were family." Band members frequently sat in with other groups when visiting, and jammed for their own amusement after hours. Irregular schedules, the demands of travel, and a career that sometimes engendered envy or suspicion from the general population drew musicians together into a relatively tight-knit community.<sup>33</sup>

This democratic atmosphere extended even to management. A number of bands organized as "commonwealths," in which members foreswore a designated top man and shared profits, losses, and responsibilities equally. Recognized leaders, who customarily rose from the ranks and occasionally returned to them, maintained a pliable relationship with the members. While a stern glance from a leader such as Bob Wills might traumatize an underling, most musicians seldom quaked before their superiors on the Gulf Coast. In general, they were irrepressible, partly because of the continued demand for talent. "I don't think I remember a musician ever being fired," mused an entertainer of long standing, "unless he was always drunk." An annoyed Floyd Tillman even held his tongue when a sideman sardonically asked "Tillie" to secure another divorce in order to duplicate the inspiration of "I Love You So Much It Hurts." Live radio broadcasts prompted a multitude of practical jokes against announcers, who were often handed hastily scribbled bawdy titles to read into open microphones. The musicians of the 1930s maintained their high spirits and a strong sense of community both because of and despite the hardships and demands of their profession.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Lane interview. The Polish Hall, now Fitzgerald's, is one of the few remaining structures of the period.

<sup>33</sup>McBride interview; Evans interview.

<sup>34</sup>Selph interview; Caruthers interview; Red Novak, interview by author, March 16, 1984; McBride interview; William Hollford, interview by author, July 31, 1984.

### *Forties Fervor, Fifties Fade-Out*

If the Great Depression drew musicians together, World War II dispersed them. Like the general population, some entered defense work or the military, while the rest remained at their prewar jobs. Leon Selph passed through several transitions, moving from fulltime music to the shipyards and, ultimately, to the navy. Jack Kennedy used his impressive brawn to advantage as a military policeman. Doc Lewis island-hopped the Pacific with the Twenty-First Infantry in fierce combat. Buck Sloan earned a boxing title, a Purple Heart, and five Battle Stars en route to Normandy. The loss of able-bodied musicians coupled with gasoline rationing and shortages of automobile parts forced groups to disband or curtail their activities. Those organizations which managed to remain intact, such as the Texas Cowboys, Bar-X Cowboys, and Laura Lee and Dickie McBride's bands, faced frequent substitutions but maintained an enthusiastic following throughout the war and the postwar boom.<sup>35</sup>

The momentum continued through the 1940s. New clubs opened to appreciative customers, while personalities, bands, radio stations, and recording studios gravitated to the Gulf Coast. A newspaper article in 1949 extolled the increased demand for country music. "Houston entertainment seekers are strong for hillbilly, or western, music," announced columnist Paul Hochuli. "They attend jamborees, hunt for it on radio programs, and buy a lot of records."<sup>36</sup> Nationally recognized recording artists brought prestige to the region, and locals such as Jerry Irby courted star status with major label contracts.<sup>37</sup>

To the traditional bands, however, the trumpet of success signaled the opening phase of a fatal decline. The influx of entertainers diluted the market and hit records, unleashed by the end of the war, flooded the scene. The appearance of disc jockeys preempted radio time previously allocated to live music and transported the luminaries of Nashville and Hollywood into every fan's living room and automobile. Biff Collie's pioneering audience request program on KNUZ stirred such enthusiasm from listeners that telephone calls overloaded the switchboard on the first day of operations. The twenty-one-year-old Collie and his colleague Walter Colvin leased a desolate beachfront on the San Jacinto River and converted Magnolia Gardens into the area's most popular weekend attraction. Celebrities of the caliber of Hank Williams, George Jones, and Ernest Tubbs accepted modest fees in return for promotion of their recordings on the local station. On one successful gamble,

<sup>35</sup>Selph interview; Jack Kennedy, interview by author, January 8, 1985; Lewis interview; Buck Sloan, interview by author, February 9, 1985; Evans interview.

<sup>36</sup>Houston *Press*, November 25, 1949.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*



Cliff Bruner, who played western swing in its earliest years with Milton Brown, still performs today. This recent album was recorded in Houston.

the promoters paid a young Elvis Presley \$150 for an appearance.<sup>38</sup>

The more perceptive regional entertainers immediately noted the ramifications of the changing conditions; all recognized their significance with time. One of the former, steel guitarist Herbert Remington, described his assessment of the situation:

The western swing field was diminishing from 1949. It was wide open for a new kind of music. As it went down, the Ozark-hillbilly type music got stronger, with Hank Williams, and the rock-and-roll was getting bigger. That's when I decided . . . I would [rather] sell shoes [than play the new music].<sup>39</sup>

Universally, the performers viewed the rise of rock as the key factor in the decline of their music. Doc Lewis discovered, "It was kind of hard for us old seasoned musicians to play rock. We looked at it on the critical side."<sup>40</sup> Remington decided to organize a touring Hawaiian combo rather than adapt. Lewis opened a piano bar and later donned a straw hat to perform with colleagues at pizza parlors. Floyd Tillman disbanded his still-popular group in 1950 to pursue his career amid the trails of the Texas hill country as a solo act. When Ben Christian died in 1956, the industry had long passed over the string bands of the 1930s and 1940s. While individual performers have sprung from the Gulf Coast in the intervening years, celebrities such as Kenny Rogers, Glen Campbell, Barbara Mandrell, and Mickey Gilley attained their reputations elsewhere and appear only infrequently in their native area. Discotheques, Top 40 radio stations which ignore local talent, and a wide array of available entertainment impose Herculean obstacles in the path of today's regional aspirants.<sup>41</sup>

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It was early 1986. An audience composed largely of young rock and country musicians eager to secure a niche in Houston's precarious music market listened politely as the speaker announced that an early artist, losing a lengthy battle with cancer, would perform a probable last time with fellow western swing musicians at a local club. "Don't think of this as a benefit," advised a knowledgeable member, "but as an opportunity to hear some great music." The crowd appeared not to recognize the name. The discussion

<sup>38</sup>Biff Collie, interview by Douglas B. Green, October 30, 1974, Country Music Foundation Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

<sup>39</sup>Herbert Remington, interview by author, December 28, 1984.

<sup>40</sup>Lewis interview.

<sup>41</sup>Remington interview; Lewis interview; Tillman interview; Jay Singletary, interview by author, July 16, 1984.

